

Lent 3 (A) – March 27, 2011
Cypress Creek Church, Wimberley, TX
Patrick Gahan
2 Corinthians 5:17-20
The Difference

There's a difference. "There is a difference between you and me," my mother declared over the phone line.

Admittedly, I had just called my mother in a tempest. Just eight months before, I had mustered out of the Army, where I had served as an infantry officer in an Emergency Deployment Battalion (EDRE). Kay and I had moved back to our hometown after my tour-of-duty was over. We had our first born son in tow and Kay was pregnant with our daughter. Our hope, like so many military families, was to rejoin our life just where we had left it. The first step for us was to involve ourselves again in the church where we had been brought up, married, and even served as youth sponsors.

But there was a problem. A new assistant pastor had joined the staff in our absence. He was young, handsome, dynamic, opinionated – and he absolutely infuriated me. It seemed like every time I walked into the church house, he was in the pulpit and issuing some harangue about “peace this and peace that”, disarmament, and – of all things – “beating swords into plowshares” (**Isaiah 2:8**). Just like the twerp, I thought, to bring in Isaiah to fight his battles!

So on one particular Sunday, I was steaming by the time Kay, Clay, and I returned home. I stormed into the kitchen, picked up the receiver from the wall phone, and dialed my mother. Yea, Mom, above all others, would be a sympathetic ear! So I boldly started right in: “Can you believe he said, ‘blah, blah, blah... blah, blah, blah’” I took a breath and there was a long silence. Mother then responded, “Pat, there is a big difference between you and me. You go to church to hear a good sermon. I go to worship Jesus.”

“Wha...wha...wha,” was all I could say. So dumfounded, I hung up the phone. Suddenly, I felt as if I had been transported into the middle of a Wal-Mart aisle in my underwear!

There was a difference separating my outlook from my mom's, and mine didn't make me look or feel good at all. The problem with me was projected across my mind as if it had been broadcast in Technicolor. Whereas a few years before, I had given my heart to Jesus, I had never really submitted my life to him. And I had run headlong into a wall of my own making. Jesus was not yet truly Lord of my life. Sure, I had asked the Lord Jesus to save me and give me the assurance of his love for me, but I had not surrendered myself to him. And there is a big, Big, BIG difference between those two!

And I bet any number of you can resonate with the story of that young, proud man – right now or at least in your past. (That young, prideful man still inhabits my body quite frequently!) Let's face it, it's one thing to say we're Christians, to apply the right bumper sticker on our car, to know the right jargon to spout back, to know the most recent praise lyrics to sing out, to carry the most in-vogue Bible, and belong to the most with-it, enlightened fellowship, but, But, BUT it is quite a different thing to really live as a Christian and to sacrifice all those other identities we think are so important in order to submit fully to the authority of Christ. These things no more make a Christian than donning a camouflaged outfit makes a soldier!

I mean, let's take a look at that young man. He had volunteered to serve in the military when not one – not one of his childhood friends had entered the armed forces. He served in General George C. Patton's noble unit and was proud of the proud of the uniform. But our Lord clothes us in a different uniform. Paul wrote to the Galatians, '*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ*' (**Galatians 3:27**). The man had grown up as the oldest of four children in a home his father abandoned. His mother supported them all on \$65 dollars a week and refused public assistance. The only way to get an atta-boy in our home was to arrive at the supper table dirty, sweaty, and bone tired from toiling at some job others refused. The American Dream he learned was through hard work. But he was called to sacrifice the American Dream for a different dream based on grace. I just love what Paul emotionally admits to his Corinthian critics, '*I begged the Lord to take my impediments – the thorn of the flesh – from me, but Jesus said to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"*' (**2 Corinthians 12:8-9**). The young man had been reared in a city in the Heart of Dixie...which is also the heart of the Bible belt. Ironclad morality was served up like fried chicken at every political rally. Not to mention that the young man's grandfather was a John Bircher, and that group could make Glen Beck look like *Snow White!* But there is a difference between the pervasive politics of *right* and *left* and being caught up with the Lord of the resurrection who could transform that young man into a new being. Again, Paul says it far better than I ever could: '*So if you have been raised with Christ, seek things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*' (**Colossians 3:1**).

Obviously, I am in a "Paul state of mind" right now. Listen to what that first Christian writer confesses is the difference that is to show up in our lives in what is one of his most up and down, yet honest letters:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see... everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ...(2 Cor 5:17-20a).

Allow me to linger on this text for just a moment. **First**, Paul writes about those *in Christ*. Do you know that Paul uses that phrase 51 times in his letters? It bespeaks a different dimension of reality of those who are *in Christ*, as opposed to those who are not. **Second**, Paul uses the word reconciliation four times in these three and a half verses. The Greek word for *reconciliation* is “katallaso”, which generally means a peace that is brokered between two warring factions. Both parties take part in the new peace. Yet for Paul our *reconciliation* is the result of Christ’s work alone. We had no part in it but to receive what has flowed down from Calvary’s cross. However, I must add that **thirdly**, our response to this incredible gracious gift is to be ministers of the reconciliation. The Greek here is “diakonos”, which means does not mean some functionary, but a *servant*. **Finally**, the Greek word Paul uses for ambassador is “presbeuo”, which the Greeks and Romans used to denote a legate or spokesman for the emperor. The presbeuo never brings his own message – only that of the king, whom he represents.

In a nutshell, that’s the new different life – the *new creation* – my mother was trying call me into. But why or why is it so hard?

Paul’s long wild and woolly relationship with the Christians at Corinth reveals a great deal. Paul first came to this southern province of Greece in about 49 AD – yes, less than twenty years after Jesus’ resurrection. During that first visit to Corinth, Paul teamed up with the married couple, Prisca (short for Priscilla) and Aquila (**Acts 18:2**), Jews who became Christians (perhaps under Paul), who were tentmakers like Paul. The three of them remained in town for 18 months setting up a network of house churches. (See how much that sounds like Cypress Creek?) These house churches were called ekklesia, or “called out” communities. I should be quick to add here that the term *ekklesia* was already being used a great deal around the Roman Empire. It described groups of freemen, merchant, artisans, skilled workers who came together as a body to have more of a voice in their communities and perhaps even in the Empire. It is easy to see why Rome detested these groups and did everything in its immense power to suppress and dismantle these groups. (That should strike a chord with today’s news.) Suffice it to say that Paul’s choice of *ekklesia* for his house fellowships was subversive from the start. To be *in Christ* is to often fly in the face of the culture and sometimes governments.

Paul’s relationship with these new upwardly mobile Corinthian Christians only became “wilder and woollier” due to their bad personal choices. They act like anything but a “new creation reconciling the world to Christ.” Setting up roadblocks between each other is more like it. The colorful list of disappointments Paul lists in his letters: **1.** making the poorer members of the house churches receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion after the well-heeled members have partaken (**1 Corinthians 11**); **2.** proffering a sexual licentiousness in the name of Christian freedom (**1 Corinthians 5**); **3.** feasting on foods that unsettles their newest and

most vulnerable brothers and sisters (**1 Corinthians 8**); **4.** bringing lawsuits against others in the ekklesia (**1 Corinthians 6**); **5.**and – worst of all – playing at a triumphalistic one up-manship on who has the most colorful spiritual gifts (**1 Corinthians 12-13**).

Like I said, it is easy to give your heart to Jesus, but living the different Christ-filled, totally Christ-directed life is a much tougher climb. We easily fall into destructive patterns of living like our Corinthian brothers and sisters. Rather than being “new creations of Christ” and reconciling – that is bringing others to God and into communion with one another – we become huge, self-satisfied, graceless human roadblocks. We hardly make a difference!

How do we escape that sentence? How do we learn to live as “God’s new creation”? I will attempt to answer that from my own Christian tradition. Yet before I do, I want to say something about yours here at Cypress Creek. I am overwhelmed by the gifts this community has given me. When I arrived here almost six years ago to serve a church that was battered and bruised, it was **Jim Donaldson** who encouraged me and said over and over again, “I want Saint Stephen’s to thrive.” **Bobby** Arnold sat next to me at our *Community Thanksgiving Celebration* that first year, and I knew that I was in the presence of a formidable man of God’s presence. It was **Michelle Gooch and Susan Campbell** that believed and believe so much in Saint Stephen’s School and know how important it is to imbibe our children in worship and the knowledge of Christ at a young age. It was **Rob Campbell** who gave me a book that changed the course of Saint Stephen’s and set us to serve those who cannot in any way pay us back through our *Jubilee Ministry*. **Cecilia Belvin** not only wrote me that she was praying for our very ill 29 year-old daughter, but wrote a special prayer for her. It is **Bill and MF Johnson** who have brought so much humor into my life. Once not long ago, Bill was at Saint Stephen’s for a Veteran’s celebration or a burial and I quipped to him, “Lord knows you need the religion.” To which he fired back without taking a breath, “Lord knows I won’t get it here!” Of course, I get the privilege of working with **Val Jeter** every day. I can’t even count the times we have taken each other’s hands and prayed together. Most importantly, my associate in ministry is **Jeannetta Watson**, and if there is a more faithful Christian sister anywhere, I have not met her. You have made a significant difference in my life and the life of Saint Stephen’s!

But back to the question, how do we become this new creation, persons and fellowships that make a difference in our world. Well, by grace we are adopted as sons and daughters of our Lord, but it is also by grace that we walk by faith. And we must be schooled in that walk.

The most prominent voice in my tradition – the Episcopal or Anglican tradition – is Saint Benedict. By the time he came along in the 5th Century, life within Rome had only declined. The state now tolerated Christianity, but the culture was in steep decline. (We should all pay attention.) Benedict, rather than throwing his hands up, started a “school for the Lord’s

service.” Fortifying this school were three major pillars: *Stability, Daily Conversion, and Obedience*. Benedict was determined to work against the *nominalism* that infected the culture-driven church – that is, those who were Christians in name only, like that young man.

Stability – In Benedict’s day, it meant for the Christian whatever monastery or convent you entered, there you remained for the rest of your life. It is unlikely that any of us will be becoming a monk or nun, but this first tenet is vitally important for our transformation in Christ. We must commit ourselves to the community of believers where we have been called. “The grass is not greener on the other side”... because once we get to that new pasture, guess who’s now there? We are! We must deal with those things and those people that drive us crazy and not run because that is how we are recreated.

The Benedictines have a saying: *Ora et labora* – “Prayer and Work.” We are gradually changed through praying and working for the good of the faith community where we live. No, the journey is not jazzy or always exciting, but is the trek that will eventually make a difference in our lives.

Daily Conversion – At a Benedictine monastery out in New Mexico, the monks have dug and open grave just outside of the chapel that worshippers must pass by many times daily. For whom has the grave been dug? Me, you, any of us. Today is all we have. In effect, the day is a symbol of our entire life lived with Christ. What will we do with it. My wife and I sing Psalm 95 every other morning, and at verse seven we cry out – “O that today you would hearken to his voice!” Episcopalians trust that Christ wants to re-convert us every day.

One way that we open an avenue to such conversion is by “bookending the day”. We have used the Book of Common Prayer since the 16th century, and the book prescribes that we begin the day with Morning Prayer and the reading of four portions of the Bible and that we end the day with Evening Prayer in much the same way. Bookending the day this way, reminds us that our days belong to God, and we are not just to fit Him in. We say, *lex orandi, lex credenda* – “our praying shapes our believing.” Our praying leads to a measurable difference in our lives.

Obedience – For Benedict that meant absolute fidelity to the Abbot or Mother Superior, much like a soldier. For us, that means we admit that we are not a free agent. We serve under the absolute authority of Christ in all things – business, family, sex, money, leisure – you name it.

Rather than thinking about obedience in terms of restraint, think instead about it being liberation. Wimberley is full of artists of every stripe, but I bet everyone will tell you that it is the practice they have undertaken with the principles of color, sound, and movement that has freed them to create some things that are beautiful. In the same way, if we practice

obedience to our Lord, we will not be inhibited but set loose on the world to make a difference.

Perhaps all this sounds like it is too much. I understand. Perhaps, too, you feel comfortably trapped in the life you have carved out for yourself. I know that feeling. And I can remember a time when I desperately wanted to make a change in my life, so I risked another phone call to my mom. This was only four years after she leveled me about worship. On this occasion, I poured my heart out about a change I needed to make in my life that I believed was right and of God. However, I had this commitment, this mortgage, this house payment – I catalogued one roadblock after another. To which she said, “Pat, you’re only trapped if you think you are.”

I just hate it when she is right!

Let us pray: *Lord Jesus, I am tired of being a pretend Christian, of paying a lot more attention to what I say about myself than what I am doing with my everyday life. So I ask that the love you have poured into my heart will show up at work, in my family, in my checkbook, in my friendships, in everything that makes me – me. Call me into the dream you have for my life and lead me to made...a difference! Amen.*